Exploring the Dynamics of Second Language Writing

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Introduction *Teaching the next generation of second language writers*

Barbara Kroll

As a field of academic inquiry, the teaching of writing to second language (L2) learners sits at the junction of the discipline of composition and rhetoric (which concerns itself primarily with identifying the nature of texts and the processes that writers engage in to produce those texts) and the discipline of language learning (which concerns itself with cognitive and affective factors learners engage in as they move toward mastery of a particular linguistic code).[1] No one teaching writing to this population of learners can responsibly serve his or her students without a clear recognition that these two fields intersect, especially at the post-secondary level. This volume is addressed to future L2 writing teachers; the authors of the chapters are steeped in traditions of inquiry central to composition and rhetoric and offer an applied linguistics perspective focused on adult learners.

A growing need for English teachers

If teaching second language skills to populations of adult students who grew up speaking other native languages was ever a simple matter for teachers, it is certainly no longer so in the twenty-first century. The complexity has been intensified by the phenomena known as "globalization" and the Internet revolution. They have brought such an expansion in the use of English throughout the world that one can only partly imagine the still unfolding ramifications, including the changing of the English language itself (Warshauer, 2000). Full participation in the world community, particularly within interconnected economic, technological, and geopolitical realities, can require a fluency in English that goes beyond the spoken language and embraces a variety of uses of the written language as well. Because the English-language cultures (among others) are increasingly literacy-driven cultures (see, for example, Baynham, 1995; Cushman, Kintgen, Kroll, & Rose, 2001; Kern, 2000) and digital-literacy driven (Warshauer, 2001), the pursuit of English entails a pursuit of written English, offering those who acquire skill in this code the possibility for improved life chances. Thus, career options in English-language teaching

seem assured for the foreseeable future, and perhaps especially for teachers who focus on teaching writing skills.

To judge by what is going on in the United States, there is a steady increase in the number of learners of English seeking entrance to our institutions of higher education. The Institute of International Education (IIE) has been tracking the number of foreign visa students enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education since 1949 (Institute of International Education, 2001). That number has continued to increase every year, undiminished in toto by any war or economic disaster impacting a particular population or world area. In the decade from 1990 to 2000, for example, the number of foreign visa students in the United States increased by over 140,000 and surpassed half a million[2] for the first time in the 1999–2000 academic year (Open Doors, 2001). And this says nothing of the vast and ever-growing number of L2 students on U.S. campuses not included in these tabulations (or any other official counts) because they are U.S. residents or citizens and do not hold foreign visas.

Further, countries outside the traditional English-speaking world are increasingly drawn into situations where fluency in English becomes critical for their citizens who wish to participate in the global arena. For example, a report prepared for the then Prime Minister of Japan and issued in January 2000 called for a national discussion on making English Japan's official second language and recommended that English-language teaching be introduced in kindergarten (Tolbert, 2000). The document suggested to the late Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi that increased fluency in English among the Japanese would greatly contribute to reversing the economic stagnation Japan was experiencing at the time, but this fluency could be accomplished only with radical changes in the current methods of delivering English-language instruction in Japanese schools (Tolbert, 2000). On another plane, many in our profession worry about the increasing number of languages dying out around the world, often with English as the replacement tongue (Crystal, 2000; Nettle & Romaine, 2000), and the concomitant need for fluency in English. Regardless of how one views such a phenomenon, it contributes to the increasing use of English in geographic regions where, different from such places as North America, Great Britain, and Australia, English does not have a long tradition. To a certain extent, then, geopolitical realities contribute to the expanding need for English-language teachers outside of English-dominant countries.

So far, I have referred primarily to English-language teaching. The teaching of writing is a specialized component of this instruction, one that has come to occupy a prominent place in research and teaching due in part to the ever-expanding student body and the recognition of changes in global realities. Over the past quarter of a century or so, faculty and researchers in many countries around the world have increasingly

recognized that teaching English writing skills to tertiary-level students who come from non-English-speaking backgrounds is a critical part of the higher education system. The growing interest in second language writing as an academic enterprise is attested to by the large number of courses in writing offered to second language students at institutions from community colleges to the most prestigious graduate research institutions; the phenomenal growth in the number of papers on the subject published in books and professional journals; the number of presentations delivered at regional, national, and international conferences sponsored by a wide range of professional organizations; and the founding of a scholarly journal devoted to the topic (the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, established in 1992). The teaching of writing in L2 contexts, once little discussed (see Blanton & Kroll et al., 2002), has come front and center in the profession of applied linguistics.

While this volume is devoted primarily to issues in the acquisition of English-language writing skills, the teaching of second/foreign languages other than English remains a significant part of school and university curricula in many different countries. Indeed, the field of second language writing is an area affecting the lives of hundreds of thousands of students at institutions around the world where they must submit high-quality written work in a language they did not acquire as native speakers; and in fact, multilingualism is alive and well in numerous locales where it might even be considered the norm (Edwards, 1994; Nettle & Romaine, 2000). Many users of second languages other than English need to be able to write fluently in their L2, and books and anthologies on specific classroom practices and issues related to second language writing in a variety of European languages (as well as in English) have begun to proliferate (e.g., Brauer, 2000; Kern, 2000; Scott, 1996). Reichelt (1999) reviews some 200 published works relating to foreign language (FL) writing and research pedagogy in the United States alone, identifying ways in which FL concerns overlap with and differ from concerns in English as a second language/English as a foreign language (ESL/EFL). The discussions in the following chapters may also be of value to future teachers of L2 writing in non-English settings, who can adapt some of the English-specific foci to their own situations and contexts.

Understanding teacher training

With all of these factors, multiple teaching opportunities are likely to await faculty able to provide instruction in L2 writing in a variety of post-secondary settings. A critical question thus becomes how best to prepare teachers to undertake this task. To serve their students well, teachers of L2 writing must be prepared with more than a set of lesson

plans, an interest in their students, and strong skills of their own in the target language. To be sure, these are necessary components, but they are not sufficient. As distinguished researcher Arthur Applebee pointed out: "Teachers of English need to make the distinction between knowledge which informs their teaching, and that which should be imparted to the student" (Applebee, cited in Applebee, 1999, p. 362).

So too, teachers of writing to L2 students need to make the distinction between what can be termed "foundational knowledge" – subject matter content that serves them as professionals – and "procedural knowledge" – ideas and techniques that will shape specific lesson plans for their students. For example, as part of building a foundation of knowledge, future teachers must acquire an understanding of how the profession has evolved and what issues form the core of subject matter (as opposed to methodological) concerns – that is, they must know what drives the field forward. Additionally, teachers should come to see that the tools they will use for analyzing their own students' progress (or lack thereof) not only serve their immediate needs on a day-to-day basis and form a component of requisite procedural knowledge but can also provide raw data that might contribute to changes in course design motivated by their foundational knowledge of course possibilities (cf. Graves, 2000).

Because good writing teachers must have a rich understanding of the field to be able to make the best possible choices in their uniquely situated teaching positions, this book is designed to help them acquire such understanding. Knowing the field includes being able to recognize how any given classroom choice speaks to a particular approach toward teaching and/or awareness of student learning issues and/or interpretation of what texts are and what they do. Further, even the most classroom-oriented of teachers should be able to contribute knowledgeably to ongoing professional discussions. The so-called theory–practice divide is undoubtedly an artificial one; I would prefer to conceive of the relationship between research and practice in the field of second language writing as an interactive one. As I have pointed out elsewhere, "Research insights drive practice and concerns for practices that do not seem to be working drive additional research" (Kroll, 2001, p. 230).

Foundational knowledge gives faculty the scholarly background to provide the best of instruction to students in second language writing and guides instructors toward making appropriate curricula and classroom choices. Attaining this scholarly background involves exposure to the accumulated knowledge of the profession and an awareness of what tools are available to expand and refine this knowledge base. It is simply not enough for prospective teachers to focus solely on acquiring information about methods and materials, important though they are. While I do not mean to downplay the significance of being able to learn from the

accumulated classroom wisdom ("best practices") of highly experienced teachers, Edge and Richards (1998, p. 571) caution that focusing solely on the search for "best practices" in and of themselves can lead to the "deskilling of teachers, who are [then] seen as the technicians responsible for learning-delivery systems" (p. 571). Rather, teachers must rely on theory to become well-trained professionals responsible for helping their students gain needed mastery. As Stenberg and Lee (2002) point out in regard to training native language (L1) composition teachers, "theory and practice necessarily function in interplay, and pedagogy encompasses both" (p. 328).

In fact, it is the command of basic foundational knowledge in a given field that allows teachers to make principled rather than ad hoc curriculum decisions. In that sense, this volume, which helps to build subject matter background, is truly a teacher-training book even though it does not provide direct guidance on such day-to-day concerns as syllabus design and lesson planning. Identifying what constitutes the "subject matter" knowledge critical for teachers is not without its controversies, however, and the reality is that the topics selected for inclusion in this volume constitute one vision of the parameters of the profession – a vision shaped by the collective experience of the contributors to this volume and our beliefs about areas of knowledge critical for teachers.

This volume is intended primarily to assist in the preparation of new teachers by providing chapters that offer overviews of key issues, discussions of the relevance of prior and ongoing research to teachers, and insight into current thinking as presented by leading scholars in the field. Whether teachers are trained in programs allied to applied linguistics, second language acquisition, modern languages (including English as a second/foreign language), or education, they must also learn to be lifelong learners themselves, continually prepared to expand their own knowledge and understanding in the pursuit of sounder teaching practices. Thus, the information contained in this book should be considered a starting point and not the end point for promoting teacher engagement with the field of second language writing.

A note on theory/model-building

Unlike introductions to some other disciplines, this book begins with a historical perspective rather than an outline of theory. In contrast, trainees in some fields, including linguistics, are initiated into and expected to become familiar with well-established theories relevant to their education and training. Although many researchers in the field of second language writing, including several contributors to this volume, are particularly interested in theory-building (e.g., Cumming, 1998;

Grabe, 2001; Matsuda, 1998; Silva, 1993), regrettably at the present time "there is no single theory of writing in a second language" (Gebhard, 1998) capable of explaining the role of and interaction among key variables discussed here. In fact, despite a wealth of information on L2 composing processes and the description of texts produced in L2, "we have very little information on how people actually *learn to write in second languages or how teaching might influence this"* (Cumming & Riazi, 2000, p. 57, italics mine).

In fact, to build a theory of second language writing, we would need to ask whether a theory of *writing* would overlap with or be distinct from a theory of *learning to write*, and to further delineate if, how, and in what ways theories relevant to *second* language writers applied to or distinguished themselves from theories applicable to *first* language writers. Grabe (2001) explains that we turn to theories for their predictive and explanatory properties, and at the moment, most of the information we have about writing and learning to write and writing classrooms is descriptive in nature, thus making theory-building difficult. Even substituting the notion of "models" for theories does not resolve the dilemma. After reviewing a number of models that have been advanced (not theories, really), Cumming (1998) notes, "We are far from seeing models that adequately explain learning to write in a second language or precisely how . . . [L2] writing should be taught" (p. 68). And last, in his recent conceptual overview of L2 writing, Hyland (2002) uses the words "theory" and "framework" interchangeably to review key approaches to the teaching of writing. Thus, volumes such as this cannot present "standard" theory in a neatly packaged format.

We *can* point out that what can pass for theory is sometimes better labeled a methodology or a widely held belief. For example, terms frequently used in discussing writing are "the composing process" and "process theory." When these were first introduced and popularized, many felt that focusing the writing course on the process of writing itself was a *theoretical* breakthrough. In retrospect, a more accurate claim would be that process insights gave rise to a *methodological* breakthrough in the teaching of writing. In fact, process theory, although widely discussed in L1 writing circles, has itself been challenged by many L1 writing theorists who have moved into a so-called post-process period (see, for example, Kent, 1999; Olson & Dobrin, 1994). Clearly, every writer, from the most novice and inept to the most skilled and professional, completes a given writing task by engaging in some sort of process. We should recognize the importance of the methodological breakthrough engendered by insights from research into the composing process of skilled L1 and L2 writers; these findings assist teachers in helping less skilled writers alter their writing behaviors so they can write more successfully. But no matter how much we help student writers "improve"

their composing process(es), we are still talking about methods and not theory, and this is just one variable in the multifaceted enterprise known as "writing."

Among other critical variables in the equation of writer, writing task, discourse constraints, and audience expectations is context. Here, too, terms such as EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and ESP (English for Special Purposes), when first introduced, seemed likely to contribute to theory-building; but they turn out to be methodologically based as well. EAP and ESP provide helpful orientations to pedagogy – perhaps more than they do to theory-building – because they suggest that the entire curriculum for a writing course is context-driven; change the context and you need to change how a course is packaged and delivered – not a trivial point, as well discussed by Swales (1990) among others.

Thus, this volume is not about specific pedagogical practices or any given theory per se, but it is a volume that should help teachers to more fully understand the framework of concerns within which the field and its key constituents (teachers and learners) operate.

Overview of this volume

This book has thirteen chapters that collectively offer an orientation to second language writing as a field; they are grouped around five areas that serve as "explorations" into the subject and set out parameters for identifying critical subject matter material, the collective foundational knowledge discussed earlier. Exploring what goes on in writing classrooms is a multifaceted enterprise. Although certain commonalities are to be expected in how teachers and students work together toward the improvement of students' L2 writing proficiency, a single change in one of many variables can alter the specific dynamics of any given class. Some of the variables considered in this volume are related to the student–teacher dynamic; others investigate the specific epistemologies associated with L2 writing as a discipline and various contexts of the writing situation.

Each section of the book is preceded by a short overview of how the chapter or chapters in that section relate to the theme of the section and/or interrelate to each other. These section introductions, by providing additional background not specifically discussed in the chapters themselves, highlight and sometimes interpret key issues in the individual chapters. In the section introductions I highlight the key focus of each chapter by showing how it answers a significant question of concern to second language writing theorists and/or practitioners.

The first section of the book explores the field in broad strokes, noting how we continue to build the bases of knowledge that are specific to the area of L2 writing. It provides a historical orientation (Chapter 1) and a

framework for considering the several research paradigms that provide insight into writers, their texts, and the contexts for writing (Chapter 2). The second section of the book explores voices of the two key stakeholders in the teaching of writing – teachers and students. It offers a tour of several English-writing curricula around the world as discussed by the teachers in those settings (Chapter 3) and a presentation and interpretation of several individual L2 writers' personal learning narratives (Chapter 4). The third section of the book explores perspectives on the texts that students produce, including issues related to teacher and peer response to student writing (Chapter 5), factors surrounding grammatical considerations in the analysis of student texts (Chapter 6), and the latest thinking about the assessment of writing (Chapter 7). The fourth section of the book explores some contexts in which to consider texts: defining and understanding how genre interacts with student writing needs (Chapter 8); an up-to-date look at the field of contrastive rhetoric (Chapter 9); drawing connections between texts consulted by writers (readings) and their own evolving texts (writings), that is, reading–writing connections (Chapter 10); and finding a role for literature in the L2 composition classroom (Chapter 11). The fifth section of the book explores technology, discussing the impact of computers and the Internet on L2 writing students and classrooms (Chapter12). Last, the book concludes with an epilogue (Chapter 13) that raises some interesting and challenging questions about the whole enterprise of teaching writing.

All the chapters have been specifically prepared for this volume and assembled to present a reasonably comprehensive sense of the key issues and questions of major concern to L2 writing specialists today. However, because teaching second language writing skills is a highly situated activity, the chapters focus primarily though not exclusively on teaching English-language writing skills to non-native speakers of English. Additionally, although most of the chapters report on research conducted in a wide range of international settings, they primarily discuss teaching writing in North American university courses. The goal of each chapter is to provide key foundational knowledge primarily for prospective and novice teachers. Most chapters can also function as resource guides by reference to extensive scholarship, with the bibliographical citations useful in promoting opportunities for further investigation. Now is an exciting time to be engaged in teaching L2 writing, and I hope this collection will inspire readers to join the conversation.

Notes

1. I am aware that Matsuda (1998) presents a more complex vision of the disciplinary relationships.

2. The number of foreign visa holders is not the same as the number of L2 speakers, since the tabulation includes native speakers of English (i.e., students from such places as England, Canada, and Australia – plausibly English L1 speakers – are included in the IIE number).

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